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ABSTRACT

A survey of images on gravestones yields a fascinating array of symbols and visual communication. This paper describes a project in which over 300 symbols in graveyards of the southeastern United States were examined. The method of recording the images and information about them was to photograph the symbol with a 35mm single lens reflex (SLR) and write down certain data. A typical entry would record the place, present date, sex of the person or people, dates of birth and death, and the symbols on the stone. Symbols are described according to the following categories: flora; fauna; shapes/symbols; tools/implements; scenes; insignia; and humanoid forms. The themes peculiar to these Southern graveyards were found to be mostly associated with the Confederacy. Nineteen figures present reproductions of various symbols. (AEF)

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Grave Songs in Stone

by J. Mark Hunter

Abstract

This project's purpose is to record, chronicle, and categorize, and comment upon the visual symbols that adorn the grave stones of the dead. It is an extension of Cochenhour and Rezabek's 1995 study of the observation and classification of sepulchral images. The primary focus is on the Southern United States and the unique images found in Southern graveyards, visual themes which persist through time, and visual themes which have discontinued or emerged over time.

For so thou didst ordain when thou createdst me, saying, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thoreturn." All we go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. *BCP*, 1979, 482-483.

Grave Songs in Stone

A survey of graven images which accompany mortal remains yields a fascinating array of symbols. It is established as a peculiar category of visual communication. Nowhere else in modern or recent culture is Everyman lionized in stone. This project's purpose is to record, chronicle, and categorize the visual symbols that adorn the grave stones of the dead and, as we shall see, sometimes the living. This present report is indebted to the pioneering work done by John Cochenour and Landra Rezabek. The pattern of the study has been completely lifted from Drs. Cochenhour and Rezabek. The author is appreciative of their generous sharing of methodology and ideas. Their methods have been used in an intentional effort to parallel their work for possible future collaboration.

This is an examination of some of the graveyards of the Southeastern United States. To date, 25 cemeteries in Tennessee (14), South Carolina (7), North Carolina (2), and Maryland (2) (so it's not a Southern state, at least it was a border state) have been examined and photographed. To date, over 300 symbols have been recorded and categorized into the seven primary divisions established by Cochenhour & Rezabek (1996). These categories are flora, fauna, humanoid forms, shapes/symbols, tools/implements, scenes, and insignia. As with the prior study, many numerous images were subclassified, or cross classified into other categories.

The method of recording the images and information about them was to photograph the symbol with a 35mm SLR and write down certain data. A typical entry would record the place, present date, sex of the person or people being memorialized, dates of birth and death, and the symbols on the stone.

Among the questions that were asked by or emerged during this study are:

- are Southern graveyards different from others studied, if so, how?
- what are visual themes exist through time?
- what visual themes have discontinued or emerged over time?

The author was pleased to discover wide range of symbols that collectively constitute grave songs in stone. Having been taught a love and respect for grave yards as a young man, the author found the tasks involved in this project to be welcome diversions that usually gave a meditative respite to the tasks of the living.

Flora

A frequent use of flowers and trees was observed. Brokenness as a theme showed greater evidence in the 18th and 19th centuries than the 20th. Numerous images of broken rose stems, uprooted willow or oak trees, or the stump of a tree were observed. Figure 1 exhibits a marker of a grave of a man who was a member of the civic organization, "Woodmen of the World". One common memorial metaphor is the healthy tree cut off. The metaphor is of someone in their young adulthood, "cut off in the prime of life."

Figure 1
Woodmen of the World

Figure 2. Shows the grave stone of a young woman who died in

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middle Tennessee in 1858. The image is of a cluster of lilies of the valley. By far the more common flower is the Easter Lily. Possible origins for this are that it is a corruption of the Easter morn symbol, or that the lilies of the valley were a favorite of the young lady. This last is suggested because Lilies of the Valley are the flower for May, the birth month of the deceased.

Figure 2
Lilies of the Valley

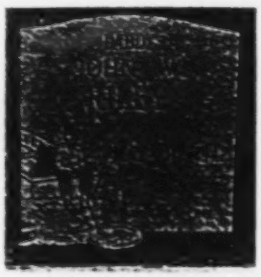
Fauna

Another common symbol is the dove, here (figure 3.) seen flying from a perch in a tree. The ecclesiastical symbol of the third member of the Christian trinity is the Holy Spirit, usually represented by the dove. However, the dove/ Holy Spirit symbol is of the dove either descending, or hovering above a scene. The indication is of the spirit of the individual is leaving the earth and ascending in the form of a dove.

Figure 3
Dove

A theme that has emerged in the 20th century is the inclusion of pets on tombstones. Figure 4 not only has the human figure of a boy, but includes the boy's dog as well. This is not a life figure in terms of it representing a likeness of an individual, but rather the romanticized image of a Huck Finnlike childhood remembered. Other images have included domestic cats and other dogs, usually in isolation.

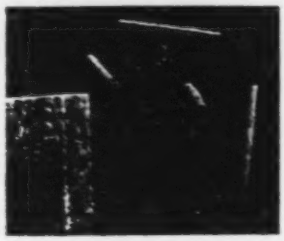
Figure 4
A boy and his dog



Shapes/Symbols

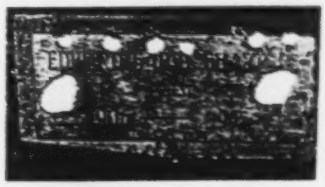
Along with humanoid forms, this is the largest category observed. Among exclusively Southern symbols is the Confederate Memorial marker (figure 5). This cross patee includes the Confederate battle flag in the center surrounded by an olive wreath. The letters C. S. A. (Confederate State of America) are on the outer arms of the cross.

Figure 5
Confederate Veteran Cross Patee



This is the grave of a priest at St.John's Episcopal Church in Berlin, MD (figure 6). The simple stone marker has been adorned with the sea shells. This was reportedly done by a young lady who used to collect them with him. Aside from the deep sentimental meaning of a touching personal remembrance, is the ecclesiastical symbolism. The sea shell is a symbol of baptism – spiritual rebirth. This can be seen a another of the many life symbols which have come to dominate the graves of the 20th century.

Figure 6
Grave stone with shells



The crosses which collectively form figure 7 reflect the prevalence of this symbol, particularly in sectarian graveyards. Of the many forms of this most Christian of symbols, the latin cross is the most simple and common. These examples all include and additional symbol within the context of the Latin cross. 7A contains

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the XR (Chi Rho), which is the Greek monogram of Christ. 7B contains the Easter Lily, a symbol of rebirth, and 7c contains a theme of grape leaves –symbolic of the

Figure 7 a, b, & c
Latin Crosses
with XP, Easter Lily, & Grapes

Eucharistic feast.

These columns are another representation of the theme of brokenness. The two pictured in Figure 8 are of a set of four found in Rose Hill Cemetery in Columbia, TN. They are the markers of the graves of the four children of this family, all of whom died within two weeks of each other. The column is

Figure 8
Broken columns

often employed to depict the life of individuals. Here it is used to memorialize the abrupt end of the lives of children.

Tools/Implements

This is the grave stone of a painter (figure 9a). The simple inclusion of a paint brush is the mark of the tool of the deceased' trade. The grave stone pictured in figure 9b includes a number of images and symbols along with this

Figure 9 a&b
Bar bells and painter's brush

weight lifter's bar bells. A new kind of sepulchral clipart has come into use. The heart or intertwined hearts are prime examples. They symbolize love. Here the hearts are reflective of the young man's wife and child.

Scenes

Figure 10 is a scene that includes a number of elements including the "Field and Stream" treatment of animals. A common emergent theme is an outdoors scene form a sportsman's view with game running and fish jumping.

Figure 10
Scene

Insignia

This marker is an example of a sepulchral resume (figure 11). The couple (only one of whom has died) is memorialized along with the individual. This stone attests to the numerous civic organizations, employment (Ford Motors

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and the railroad), mottos by which to live, and picture of the couple.

Figure 11
Insignia

Humanoid Forms

The humanoid form is prevalent through the last three centuries. As a symbolic visual, it is the most interesting to the author. There are numerous classifications of the humanoid form. The life image, hands, angels, illustrative, and other.

Figure 12
Nannie

Nannie (figure 12) was a four year old who died in the late 19th century. She is buried at the Greenwood cemetery in Clarksville TN. This is a prime representation of the life image of the deceased. The statue is life sized with close detail throughout. It was carved by from Italian marble in Italy.

Of particular interest in this memorial is the nature of community involvement when it was stolen in the summer of 1996. A furor ensued with numerous citizens coming forward to offer rewards and other help. The statue was found in the possession of an honest antique dealer in Boston, MA. He took it upon himself to repair the right arm which had been damaged and to drive her the hundreds of miles home to Clarksville. This grave marker returned amid a public reception and acclamation of her return. Grown men were said to have openly wept. *Leaf Chronicle*

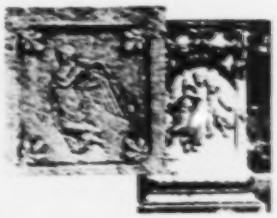
Figure 13
Look Homeward Angel

This angel (figure 13), marking the grave of a woman who was buried in the Hendersonville, NC public graveyard, also took on a meaning that transcended the life of the person being memorialized. This is the angel that Thomas Wolfe wrote about in his novel, *Look Homeward Angel*, (19xx). This humanoid figure stands on a 4' pedestal and stretches over 12 feet in the air.

Figure 14
Confederate memorial

The Confederate Memorial is ubiquitous across the South. This example (figure 14) appears as a grave memorial. The figure is a likeness of the soldier. Note the rifle being held has its barrel in the ground. An attitude of resignation from conflict.

Angels have been a theme since the beginning of New World cemeteries. In the first of these two examples (figures 14 a&b) is a Victorian treatment of angelic ascension to heaven. The fig 14 b is the grave of three children of a family. The deaths were within two years of each other.



Another treatment in the burial of a child is this stone from Old Zion Presbyterian Church in Columbia, TN (figure 15). This photograph was taken from above. The image is that of a child asleep on a pillow. The pillow tops a three foot high slab stone which identifies the child and her parents.

Figures 16 a&b are a common motif of clasped hands. These symbolic gestures depict various meanings. Frequently, it is symbolic of a hand shake with God. A hello to heaven. Figure 16a represents a parting. The legend reads, "farewell", and

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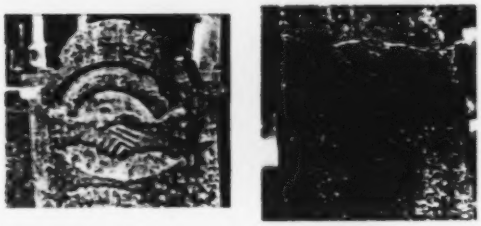
the hands may be that of a woman and a man.

Figures 16 a&b
Clasped hands



The other hand shake example is atop the grave of a Mason. The Masonic symbol appears below the hands and careful inspection reveals the stylized handshake of the Masons.

Combinations and Other

This is a charming example of Victorian excess (figure 17). Among the symbols present are: a cross made of timbers, ivy (everlasting life), easter lilies (rebirth), an anchor (hope), the rugged rock (salvation), a sleeping cherub (asleep in death), and a wreath of roses (symbolic of death and rebirth).

Figure 17
Victorian Baroque

The final sub category is *humor*. Rare is the tombstone that reflects levity or humor. Graveyards are usually marked by tranquility, meditation, seriousness, and mourning, even among the newer themes of renewal of life amidst death. One young man's stone contained the quoted epitaph, "In a second – maybe later." An allusion to someone habitually late? Perhaps even someone late to his own funeral. A striking example of visual punning is found in the stone which memorializes the life of Meyer Brick, a citizen of Clarksville, TN (figure 18). Red granite is used in the manufacture of the stone. It is scored to depict a stack of bricks and stands out among the monochromatic grey of Greenwood Cemetery, Clarksville, TN.

Themes

The themes found peculiar to Southern graveyards are mostly associated with the Confederacy. While there are a very few individuals who continue the confederate theme today, it is one that represents a glimpse of history rather than a continuance. Another theme which has been apparent form the past three centuries is the depiction of a life image

Figure 18
Humor

of the deceased. In the 17th and 18th centuries, this practice was restricted by cost of manufacture. Today there are a number of relatively inexpensive methods of life depiction. Among them are photo enamel portraits, and laser etching from digitized images.

Areas of further study might include:

- what symbols are understood today?
- how is technology affecting the creation of tombstones
- what are the methods of construction?
- continued thematic inquiry

One carves into stone that which is to remain as an (ever)lasting message. even so I am reminded of Donne's imagery that lives even longer. The poet and priest John Donne spoke about death in one of his sermons:

It comes equally to us all, and makes us all equal when it comes. The ashes of an Oak in the

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Chimney, are no epitaph of that Oak, to tell me how high or large that was; it tells me not what flocks it sheltered while it stood, not what men it hurt when it fell. ...And when a whirlwind hath blown the dust of the Churchyard into the Church, and the man sweeps out the dust of the Church into the Churchyard, who will undertake to shift those dusts again, and to pronounce, This is the Patrician, this is the noble flower, and this the yeomanly, this the Plebeian bran.

John Donne,
LXXX Sermons, Christmas Day, 1627.

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